

PHYSICAL SAFETY TOOLKIT



FOR YOUTH CLIMATE JUSTICE LEADERS
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Project 90 by 2030 is a social and environmental justice organisation inspiring and mobilising South African society towards a sustainably developed and equitable low-carbon future.

What is the Youth Support Hub

Project 90 by 2030's Youth Support Hub is a youth-led initiative which aims to bring young people in the climate justice movement together and develop their skills, by connecting them to each other and to expert coaches who can help them grow. More information here: www.youthsupporthub.org.za

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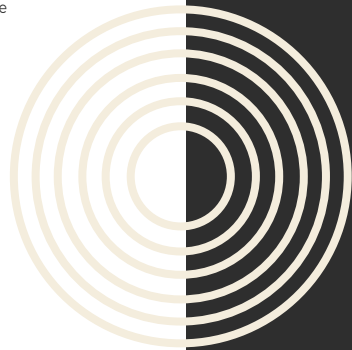
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**TOOLKIT
OUTLINE**



WHY THIS TOOLKIT



As youth climate leaders, campaigners and researchers in Southern Africa, you are at the forefront of crucial environmental and social change. But with this duty, comes increasing risk within the sector over the last couple of years. Speaking truth to power - especially in environments marked by impunity, political polarisation and regulatory rollbacks - can expose you to challenges not just online, but in your day-to-day work too.

This toolkit is here to help you **understand, identify, and mitigate** some basic risks related to **physical safety**, within the **holistic safety risk management** framework approach to safety. That means taking care of not only your body, but your mind, emotions, and community as well and learning how to address risk proactively.

In Southern Africa, especially South Africa with its high crime rate, there is a misconception that physical safety is just related to the protection of our physical selves - high-walls, electric fences, safety guards etc. In fact, the physical safety pillar within the holistic safety risk model deals with a much wider scope of risk, in a systematic way - especially within the human rights, climate and environmental engagement civil society space that takes into consideration the systems in which we live and work and how to improve those.

This toolkit will cover the basics of – identifying, understanding and ultimately lowering (mitigating) common risks faced within the physical safety pillar. While all risk can never be entirely mitigated, this approach aims to lower as much of it as possible to allow for a safer working environment in the vital work you do. Certain chapters will also provide best practices and guidance on prominent areas of the physical safety pillar including safe travel and mobilisation action, based on decades of data and experience in the sector.



INTRODUCTION TO RISK AND PHYSICAL SAFETY



1.1 Why Pre-Empt/Anticipate Risk?

Too often, movements only focus on safety **after something has gone wrong** - when someone has been harmed, harassed or targeted. Pre-emptive thinking helps you **reduce harm before it happens**, so your movement and important work can continue safely and sustainably.

Think of it like preparing for an adverse weather event like a storm: you don't wait for the storm to hit to start building your shelter.

Why it matters:

- Southern Africa has a [documented history](#) of **state surveillance, police brutality, and corporate intimidation**.
- Climate activism can provoke [hostility](#) from powerful entities whose interests are threatened by your actions.

Pre-empting risk empowers YOU (and your organisation) to act without fear, stay organised under pressure, and protect one another in solidarity.



1.2 Avoiding the normalisation/habituation of certain risks

In high-pressure environments, it's easy to start **normalising danger**: always being followed, receiving threats, having no safe space to meet. But repeated exposure DOES NOT mean it's okay, or should be ignored because it's "normal for where I live/work". This phenomenon has a name and is common in medium to high-risk contexts where youth climate leaders live and work.

Habituation refers to the gradual desensitisation to risk or danger due to repeated exposure to certain threats or stressful situations. Over time, youth climate leaders may begin to perceive these threats as normal or insignificant, even when they remain potentially harmful. This psychological process can dull awareness and response, leaving individuals vulnerable to both physical harm and mental exhaustion. For youth climate leaders, especially those consistently exposed to surveillance, intimidation, or even mild harassment, habituation can compromise their ability to accurately assess and respond to real threats.

EXAMPLE: *In Zimbabwe youth climate leaders who regularly attend activations and community mobilisations.*

In the early stages of activism, many are highly alert to police presence, but repeated exposure to low-level intimidation (such as being followed or questioned) can lead them to normalise these experiences. This habituation may result in a failure to take necessary precautions, such as notifying trusted contacts before public actions or avoiding unsafe routes home. Similarly, youth environmental defenders in Namibia working to protect Indigenous land from extraction may gradually become less cautious about meeting in remote areas without safety planning, simply because previous meetings ended without incident.

Don't ignore red flags - Habituation to danger can lead to burnout, trauma, or worse. Staying constantly on alert isn't sustainable but **normalising in safety is not resilience**. Instead, strive to create **safe routines, boundaries, and cultures** within your organisation/coalition where risks are taken seriously and action is taken early.

To better address the risks associated with habituation, it is crucial that youth climate leaders adopt a routine of reflective safety practices. This includes regular debriefings after actions, revisiting risk assessments as local risk contexts change, and cultivating peer-to-peer accountability. Collective awareness of habituation can really help youth leaders maintain a healthy level of vigilance without succumbing to paranoia or fear.

Developing a **"Check-in Culture"** where members regularly report how they're feeling and if they've noticed anything strange or threatening can be hugely valuable, especially with organisations working closely with project affected communities.



1.3 The Link Between Physical Safety and Holistic Safety

Holistic safety goes beyond locks, alarms, or escape routes. It looks at various **pillars** that make up the safety of an individual or organisation, where the holistic approach looks at the whole picture across various aspects:

- Your **physical safety**
- Your **psychosocial/mental health**
- Your **digital safety**
- Your **legal resilience**
- Your **narrative resilience**

All of these aspects are **interconnected**. For example:

- Being **physically** attacked can lead to **trauma** and **burnout**.
- A hacked phone can expose your location to potential attackers which may lead to a physical abduction or assault or detention/arrest, if targeted by state surveillance.
- A youth climate leader who is anxious and not sleeping well, will be more likely to forget to lock a device like a smartphone or which team member to call in an emergency, like a detention – linking the **psychosocial** (or mental wellness) pillars with **digital** and eventually **physical** risks.

A threat to one part of your safety can ripple through all areas of your life. That's why we need a **holistic** approach.

1.4 Understanding the Difference Between Safety and Security

In the context of humanitarian work and activism, particularly within climate and environmental movements, it is essential for youth in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to understand the difference between safety and Security. In the context of our work and similar to the humanitarian sector, safety refers to protection from unintentional harm- such as accidents, natural hazards, or environmental exposure- whereas security addresses intentional threats, such as violence, harassment, detention or politically motivated attacks.

Recognising this distinction helps youth leaders assess and manage risks more effectively.

EXAMPLE: a youth leader attending a climate mobilisation in Harare, Zimbabwe might face safety risks from poor crowd control or extreme weather (like twisting their ankle or suffering heatstroke during a heatwave), while simultaneously facing security threats from targeted police intimidation or surveillance for their environmental stance.

By applying a holistic physical risk management approach, youth leaders can plan appropriately around these risks: ensuring adequate hydration, travel logistics, and emergency contacts for safety, while also developing communication protocols, buddy systems, and community support networks to mitigate security threats.



1.5 The Intersectionality of Risk

Understanding Layered Vulnerabilities in Youth Climate and Environmental Activism in Southern Africa

In the context of youth climate and environmental activism across Southern Africa, especially in countries like Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, youth leaders often face multifaceted threats. These risks are not experienced uniformly - they intersect with identities such as **gender, race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, urban/rural location**, and even **political affiliation**. This chapter explores how these factors shape the way risks are experienced and provides a framework for managing physical safety through a holistic and intersectional lens.

1. What Is Intersectionality?

The concept of intersectionality refers to how different aspects of identity combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. In the context of safety, intersectionality helps us understand that a queer working-class female youth leader in Zimbabwe will likely face different types and intensities of risk than a cis middle-class male youth leader in the same country, for example.

2. Why Intersectionality Matters in Physical Holistic Safety

Physical safety is often thought of in terms of direct risks - arrest, physical assault, harassment - but for marginalised groups, the risk environment is compounded by systemic inequalities and bias. Holistic safety, which includes mental, physical, digital, and social well-being, requires a deeper understanding of how layered identities increase or decrease exposure to risk.



There are various case studies in the region in which this disparity has elevated risk. In rural areas of Namibia, for example, female youth campaigning against uranium mining near Etosha have faced repeated **threats of gender-based sexual violence**. Safety strategies must include **secure transportation, lodging, and respectful male allyship** where appropriate. **In Zimbabwe, political risk and economic vulnerability** in Mutoko district, where youth leaders opposing granite mining by Chinese companies were **detained** and lacked resources for legal recourse. Rural, economically disadvantaged groups bear higher risk and need **low-cost legal networks** and **safe communication channels**. In South Africa, black youth from townships like Khayelitsha and Soweto are disproportionately targeted by police during environmental forums in white-majority urban spaces. A 2023 incident in Johannesburg removed township youth leaders from a public climate-planning meeting under claims of being “disruptive.” This reflects entrenched inequality and necessitates cross-class alliances and **community-centred strategies** within environmental movements. What is the safety implication of this example? Urban-based youth leaders need to be aware of how classism and institutional racism influence access to space, protection from police, and media coverage. Building cross-class alliances and community-centred communication strategies can counteract this.

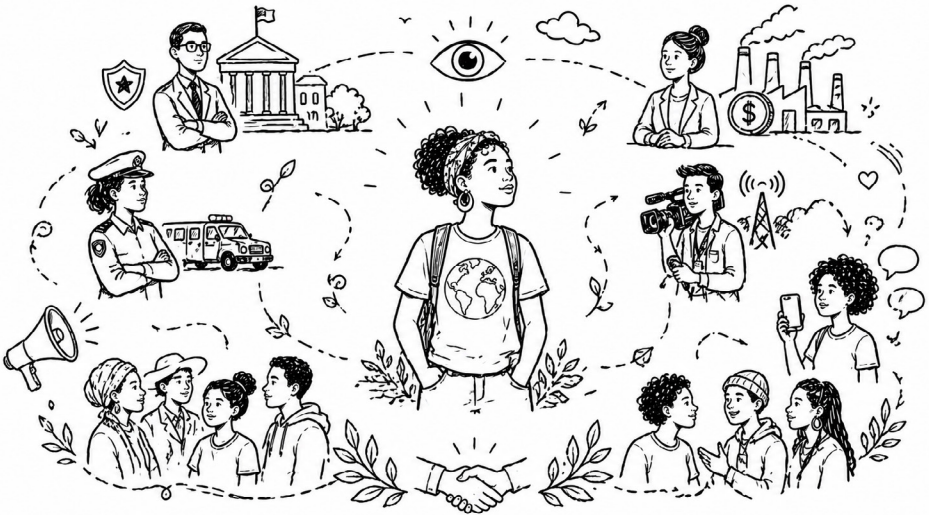
Questions around intersectionality to consider in your own network/organisation/coalition:

- **Who in your group faces the most severe risks, and why?**
- **How do socioeconomic barriers affect transport or legal aid and limit your planning?**
- **What steps are you taking to be mindful of the specific risks faced by rural, female, LGBTQ+, disabled youth and other marginalised groups?**

Remember: *When we strengthen protections for the most vulnerable among us, we secure resilience for the entire movement.*



UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT AND ACTORS



To protect ourselves effectively in this increasingly dangerous space, we must **understand the landscape we're working in** – i.e. who supports us, who threatens us, and how power dynamics around us are built. This chapter will help you map and better consider the “players” in your space, analyse risks, and strengthen your networks for safety and resilience.

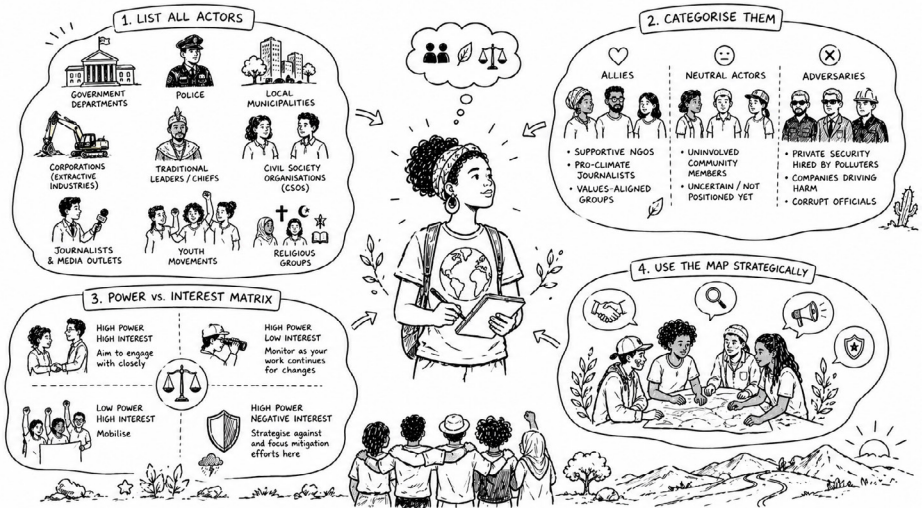
1. Actor Mapping: Allies, Adversaries, and Everyone In Between

Before you can plan for your safety, you need to know who's in your environment - who supports your work, who could want to disrupt it, and who might do either depending on the situation.

What is Actor Mapping?

Actor mapping is a tool that helps you visually or mentally organise:

- Allies (supportive individuals, groups, institutions)
- Adversaries (those who pose risks to your safety or work)
- Neutrals or “swing” actors (those who could be influenced either way)



An example of how to do a basic actor map which may look familiar in you or your own organisation's work:

1. List all actors involved in your activism space:

- Government departments (e.g. Environmental/mining ministry, Police)
- Local municipalities
- Corporations (especially extractive industries)
- Traditional leaders or chiefs
- Civil society organisations (CSOs)
- Journalists and media outlets
- Youth movements
- Religious groups

2 Categorise them:

- Allies (e.g. supportive NGOs, pro-climate journalists)
- Neutral actors (e.g. uninvolved community members)
- Adversaries (e.g. private safety hired by polluters)[4] [5] [6] [7]

3 Use a power vs. interest matrix:

- High power [ability to positively support/influence your work] + high interest [your work could directly influence the actor positively to motivate their collaboration with you] = Aim to Engage with closely
- High power + low interest = Monitor as your work continues for changes
- Low power + high interest = Mobilise
- High power + negative interest = Strategise against and focus mitigation efforts here



RISK ASSESSMENT BASICS



Why Risk Assessment Matters

Risk is a vital part of activism and you are probably already doing risk assessments in your day-to-day work, informally, especially when you're challenging extractive industries, government inaction, or corporate polluters. But **risk doesn't mean defeat**. When you understand it, **you can control it**, plan around it, and keep yourself and your community safer. This chapter will help you move from more informal discussions around the assessment of risk towards a more centralised and structured approach.

Risk assessment is the process of:

- Identifying what can go wrong – write these as a list
- Figuring out how likely it is to happen [Rate Likelihood from 1-5]
- Understanding the impact - or how bad the consequences could be should the risk materialise [rate Impact from 1-5]
- Ranking the initial list of risks based on the scores above – this will indicate priority of the risks to be addressed first
- Choosing and deciding what actions to take or measures to put in place to prevent or respond to any of the above risks/threats being realised



3.1 Likelihood vs. Impact of Risks

The core of any risk assessment is understanding two key things:

Likelihood – How probable is this risk?

- Has it happened before to you or others?
- Are there warning signs?
- Is the risk increasing (e.g. before a mobilisation)?

Impact – If it happens, how bad would it be?

- Could someone get injured or traumatised?
- Would it destroy trust or credibility?
- Would it compromise your entire network?

EXAMPLE:



If **arrest or detention at a mobilisation** against the effects of a coal mine in rural South Africa is fairly likely you could rate it **3/5** for **LIKELIHOOD**. This score of high probability could be based on previous similar mobilisations where a trend was identified. Based on previous incidents where police have detained or arrested protestors, the impact may have been quite significant for youth leaders who have been assaulted by police while being arrested, traumatised in detention in poor holding conditions and the larger disruption of project/coalition activities due to the detention/arrest of key team members - so you may rate the **IMPACT 4/5**.



With **LIKELIHOOD** and **IMPACT** combined, this **INITIAL RISK RATING (before we add measures to lower risk)** would be **7/10 (or 3.5/5)**. To lower this risk to an acceptable level we as a team could decide on **ACTIONS & MEASURES** to lower either the **LIKELIHOOD** of the risk happening OR the **IMPACT** OR **BOTH**. These could include - securing legal support before the mobilisation so that **impact is lower** by protestors being released soon after detention/arrest or making sure all the correct permits and applications for the mobilisation are complete and that marshals have been briefed ahead of time to coordinate better with public order police to lower the likelihood of arrest/detention or excessive use of force (assault etc.). Once you've applied these measures, you could reassess the **LIKELIHOOD** & **IMPACT** scores and see if they are lowered enough to consider the activity safe enough to proceed with.

You can use a **basic risk matrix** to prioritise risks:

	LOW IMPACT	HIGH IMPACT
Low Likelihood	Monitor	Plan cautiously
High Likelihood	Reduce/prepare	Mitigate as a priority or avoid related activity

Being prepared is not being paranoid. It's being intentional. When you take time to understand the risks you face, you **reclaim power** over your choices. Risk will always exist-but how you respond is up to you.





MANAGING RISKS

Responding Wisely When Risks Cannot Be Avoided

Once risks have been identified through an assessment, the next step is deciding what to do about them. Risk management is about making informed choices to reduce harm and protect yourself, your purpose, and momentum. Not every risk can be eliminated, but many can be managed and the likelihood/impact lowered through conscious and strategic decisions.



4.1 How to Manage Risks?

There are four main ways to manage a risk. You may use one or a combination depending on the situation.

1. Avoid the risk

You change your plan or action to prevent the risk from arising at all. This is often difficult for youth coordinators to do as they can often feel it will adversely affect the larger advocacy work, BUT responsible leaders will ALWAYS be open to delaying or cancelling an action or activity if the risk is assessed as too high. They primarily have a **duty of care** to the youth leaders they coordinate or manage, before the goals of a campaign.



EXAMPLE: You cancel a mobilisation in a high-risk area due to signs of police violence or repeated incidents of illegal mine private security company detentions/assault.

2. Mitigate/lower the risk and impact

You take steps to reduce the likelihood or the impact of the risk/threat.

EXAMPLE: You choose to wear protective gear for teargas and go with a buddy to reduce harm and improve coordination during a mobilisation.

3. Transfer/Share the risk

You share the responsibility or consequences with someone else.

EXAMPLE: You work with a national media partner to publish a story you would be too vulnerable to publish alone. This would also link to your **narrative safety** as an **organisation, coalition or collective**.

4. Accept the risk

You decide the benefit is worth the risk and take full responsibility without putting measures in place to reduce it.

EXAMPLE: You accept the risk of being identified on social media in order to speak up for your community OR you approve a higher risk trip, knowing you have the capacity and measures in place to lower the risk to an acceptable level.

REMEMBER: These strategies are not about giving up or giving in. They are about making informed, values- and data-based choices to make sure everyone is kept safe. It is not a failure to make an informed decision to delay or cancel an action deemed too risky.



4.2 Risk Appetite: Knowing Your Limits

Risk appetite refers to **how much risk a person or group is willing to take in pursuit of their mission or work**. This varies by individual and by collective, and it can change over time.

Questions to ask yourself:

- How much danger am I willing to face for this action?
- What are the limits of what I can mentally, emotionally, or physically handle right now?
- Is my group prepared for the possible consequences?

Your risk appetite is influenced by factors like:

- Your identity and past experiences
- The urgency of the issue
- Your emotional relationship with the topic
- The level of support and capacity available
- Your mental and emotional state

It is okay – and again, in fact **the responsible thing to do, to say NO to an action that feels too risky for you**. A strong movement needs its people alive, safe, and whole. Have open conversations in your organisation, coalition or collective about different risk appetites. Respect and support each other's boundaries.



4.3 The Three Safety Strategies

In the world of safety risk mitigation, there are 3 classic approaches or strategies to lowering risk. As we've seen above, different situations call for different safety strategies. These strategies should help guide your choices in risk management. In our sector, these approaches would be applicable in different ways to the humanitarian sector, for example but the principles remain the same:

1. Acceptance

In our sector, while challenging, we could consider this probably the most vital and effective approach to lowering risk, especially where engagements with affected communities are concerned. With this approach we aim to reduce risks by building trust and legitimacy within the communities we work through their heightened acceptance of our work and our, often, shared goal. This is particularly relevant with communities where we aim to help alleviate their suffering through various means (e.g. advocacy, awareness campaigns, research reports etc.) and through the cooperation of communities also lowers risk from opponents (authorities, companies etc.), through the sharing of important information to aid in the assessment of risk.

Use when: *You are working in your home community or engaging in dialogue with rural local leaders (e.g. over a shared meal to build trust) who may, for example - share relevant safety/safety updates with you and your team visiting the area warning about poor road conditions after a flood or the movements of police patrols that may interrupt an upcoming community engagement meeting you have organised*

Tools: *Relationship building, transparency, local customs, community support and mutual safety risk information sharing.*

2. Protection

This could be considered the second most vital approach for our movement and involves physically/digitally preventing harm by creating barriers or using protective measures to lower risk. This could be putting up a barbed wire fence for your office/home/remote workplace in a suburb with a high crime rate or insisting on your friends using encrypted communications apps like SIGNAL or adding very strong passwords to laptops taken into communities.

Use when: *Threats are direct and need to be countered and trust or deterrence is not possible.*

Tools: *Safety plans, travel precautions, buddy systems, safe houses, office safety.*



3. Deterrence

This is usually used the least in our sector but there are few ways in which this can be done. You discourage attacks by showing that there will be consequences returned on the aggressor. In our work, there is a very strong link between deterrence and the legal and narrative pillars of holistic safety.

Use when: You are facing risks from actors who care about their public reputation or legality e.g. if you attack us or the community, you could be sued and taken to court OR if you attack us, we will XYZ

Tools: Media attention, legal threats, rapid response networks, public exposure.

These strategies are not one-size-fits-all. Often, a blend of all three is most effective.

EXAMPLE: For a mining project in South Africa's coal-belt, you may use **acceptance** within the project affected community to warn you about police presence that may interrupt a community meeting, **deterrence** through legal/narrative communication partners releasing a statement stating that any police intervention will be met with a legal response in retaliation, and **protection** by ensuring all phones are locked with strong passwords during public events and to make sure that all car doors are locked in urban areas surrounding the project where your assessment has identified petty crime as a risk.



Final Thought

Risk management is about being strategic and proactive, not fear. Choosing how to face danger with care and intention makes you stronger, not weaker. By using these tools, you build not only safety but also sustainability in your activism.



PRACTICAL PREVENTATIVE SAFETY



Planning and preparation are your most powerful tools when it comes to physical safety. Being proactive rather than reactive helps prevent harm and build resilience. This chapter outlines real-world steps that Southern African youth climate leaders can take to **reduce physical risks in advance**.

5.1 Situational Awareness

Situational awareness means being conscious of your surroundings, your actions, and potential threats around you. It is the foundation of physical safety and helps you respond quickly to danger.

How to stay situationally aware:

- Keep your phone away when walking or traveling in unfamiliar or tense areas
- Scan your environment for exits, suspicious individuals, or unusual activity
- Use the “baseline” method: observe what is normal in an area, then watch for anything out of the ordinary
- Trust your gut. If something feels off, it often is



Situational awareness is not about being paranoid. It is about staying alert so you can make better decisions in the moment, but there are some practical tools and approaches used all the way from law enforcement to humanitarian workers to help better understand and improve one's thought processes related to situational awareness.

In high-risk field contexts such as monitoring illegal logging in Zimbabwe, attending community mobilisations in South Africa, or conducting biodiversity surveys in remote areas of Namibia - situational awareness is your foundational layer of physical safety. Traditionally, it involves three key levels: **perceiving** your environment, **understanding** its significance, and **predicting** what might happen next.

EXAMPLE: *in Zimbabwe's rural areas, youth leaders might observe increased activity from unfamiliar vehicles or outsiders, which could indicate illegal land activity. In Namibia, recognising unusual movement patterns in conservation zones or the sudden absence of community wildlife monitors can signal a shift in safety conditions. Being situationally aware means staying constantly informed and alert, not only to the immediate surroundings but also to broader developments such as weather conditions, policy changes, or regional tensions.*

The OODA Loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) - is a practical framework to help youth leaders respond quickly and effectively to dynamic/quickly changing situations during a single high-intensity incident (e.g. an escalating mobilisation following intervention of police) or even strategically over a longer time, such as a few days in which a local safety/safety situation is shifting – e.g. following an unexpected flood.

First, **OBSERVE** the environment by gathering real-time information like the presence of law enforcement, environmental hazards, or unfamiliar attendees at a meeting.

Next, **ORIENT** by interpreting what this information means in your context using local knowledge and cultural awareness. In South Africa, for example, orienting might involve recognising the significance of certain political symbols or insignia/rank of police unit uniforms at a mobilisation that is escalating in intensity.

After orienting, **DECIDE** on a course of action – for example, after noticing the presence of a certain police unit you could decide to alter your route, delaying an event, or informing your support network at the same mobilisation to do the same.

Finally, **ACT** on the decision and then begin the cycle again.

In a larger strategic awareness context - for example, in Namibia – a conservation NGO might **observe** an increase in animal poaching, **orient** by connecting it to recent drought-induced economic hardship in the community, **decide** to enhance patrol timing to be more regular, and **act** by coordinating with trusted local partners and community leaders to address the shift in local context.



White

Tuned Out.
Relaxed & completely unaware of the surroundings.
Generally unprepared.

Yellow

Relaxed Awareness.
Aware of surroundings and actively scanning for threats. Can quickly respond if needed.

Orange

Focused Awareness.
Monitoring a potential threat with a high level of observance. In a heightened state of alertness.

Red

High Alert.
Actively responding to a threat and taking action.

LEVELS OF SITUATIONAL AWARENESS: The Cooper Colour Scale [Source: Safety In EMS, South African Health Department, 2020]

Another vital model for personal situational awareness and readiness is the Cooper Colour Code, which outlines **levels of alertness** and is especially useful during field trips or higher-risk public facing actions or engagements.

The scale consists of four colours: **White (unaware and unprepared)**, **Yellow (relaxed awareness)**, **Orange (specific alert)**, and **Red (imminent action required)**. Beyond red – is black, and where the level of stress supersedes rational thought, situational awareness and action. This is often where the brain will move into the fight/flight/freeze modes of survival and where we can lose control of a situation and our own actions.

Youth leaders should aim to operate in yellow while in public or field settings - aware of our surroundings but not paranoid. If a potential threat is identified, such as aggressive behaviour during a mobilisation in Johannesburg or suspicious surveillance near a community gathering in Harare, move into Orange by focusing on that specific threat and preparing to act. If the situation escalates - for instance, law enforcement becomes confrontational or a mob forms - shift into Red, which involves taking immediate protective action, such as retreating to a safe location or activating your emergency communication plan. Avoid staying in Red for too long, as it can cause fatigue, impair judgment and can escalate to a survival response (fight/flight/freeze in the extreme).



5.2 Sensitive Meetings (With Authorities or Communities)

When engaging in dialogue with government officials, police, or traditional leaders, or when facilitating climate/enviro-related meetings in communities, it is important to prioritise physical and emotional safety. A large dimension of risk lies in this area in our sector as our activities often require meetings which may need discretion or be assessed more closely for risk of interference by opponents of our work. The following are some basic best-practices to consider before a sensitive meeting.

Before the meeting:

- Clarify the agenda and purpose and place focus on understanding who will attend – making sure that only authorised attendees are present and that any additional attendees are vetted as trustworthy by community members or partners. A basic actor mapping exercise (chapter 2) could help strategise better in preparation-
- Avoid going alone, especially to secluded or official settings.
- Inform a trusted contact of your location, time, and expected return.
- Dress in a way that is respectful of the setting but also comfortable for you - laced up shoes are always recommended in case one needs to move fast on foot in an emergency.
- Bring printed documents rather than storing everything on your phone if there is no risk of printed documents exposing others to risk.
- Secure all devices (laptops/phones) with strong password and limit sensitive information about the meeting (location, attendance, points of business) to only those directly involved with the meeting.

During the meeting:

- Remain calm, even if provoked.
- Maintain situational awareness for any noted shifts in context.
- Take notes discreetly or debrief afterwards. This is better for maintaining situational awareness.
- Avoid revealing unnecessary personal details – stick to the business at hand as much as possible.

After the meeting:

- Debrief with your team and record any concerns or red flags safety wise noting any potential future safety issues e.g. a particular governmental official who asked many personal questions which may lead to an arrest later on regarding your org's activities.
- Consider whether any follow-ups may increase your exposure to risk.



5.3 Travel Safety

Many climate defenders in Southern Africa travel to rural areas, government buildings, or conference spaces, often with limited public infrastructure. Whether by taxi, bus, motorbike, or on foot, travel can expose you to physical harm, surveillance, or logistical delays.

In the physical safety pillar, travel safety is one of the most prominent areas of focus as it comes with some of the most varied risks, regardless of context. For this reason, a travel preparation document is vital in making sure you have prepared as much as possible for the upcoming international or domestic trip and so that your colleagues know how to respond in an emergency.

This free travel form has been developed with Southern African climate and environmental youth leaders in mind and covers all the necessary considerations in an easy-to-use checklist before, during and after travel. It also includes vital aspects of safe travel – i.e. **setting up a travel-buddy** to help track your trip back home and respond to any incidents/emergencies, **check-in procedures** (with responses if check-ins are missed) and **capturing your information accurately** so it's readily available in an emergency situation.

5.4 Safety at Mobilisations

Mobilisations are powerful tools for the climate justice movement, but they also carry serious risks including arrest, violence, or targeting by hostile actors. Preparing ahead of time can help you reduce harm and respond quickly to emergencies.



Final Thought

- Being prepared does not mean fearing every moment. It means **acting with clarity and care**. Preventative safety is a form of duty and responsible dedication to yourself, your team, and your cause. When you build these practices into your everyday activism, you not only reduce harm, but help your movement stay grounded and strong in the long term and over time strengthen the safety awareness and internal culture of your organisation, movement or coalition.



5.5 Documenting and Analysing Incidents



When youth leaders face threats like intimidation, arrests, violence, surveillance - recording the details matters deeply. A well-written incident report captures **what happened, where, when, how, who was involved, and any supporting evidence** such as CCTV footage, photos or witness statements.

This creates a clear account that can be used later for advocacy with NGOs, human rights organisations or legal recourse. These records also help map patterns of repression, support credible reporting to regional bodies and serve as an accountability archive both internally and within the larger climate/environmental advocacy space.

Analysing aggregated incident reports over weeks or months can also **reveal trends that inform holistic safety planning**. If youth leaders in Zimbabwe, for example, are experiencing increased surveillance or detentions during election periods, as reported by civil society monitoring groups, pattern analysis signals elevated risk can help teams determine when to escalate protective measures or even restrict movement or activities entirely.



Tracking **safety incidents** like car accidents or other near misses (e.g. fires, weather related incidents) is equally important for preventing future harm. These records help identify hazardous routes, unsafe travel times, office safety and informs whether existing measures are sufficient. Most importantly, it shows a proactive commitment to staff and volunteer well-being. Tracking threats and violence helps youth leaders **spot patterns like surveillance, harassment, or arrests - especially around mobilisations or big events** - so they can plan smarter and stay safer. Keeping records of incidents also **builds evidence for media, legal cases, and advocacy**, while showing that the movement takes everyone's safety seriously. Keeping a record means new members can learn from past experiences instead of repeating mistakes.

A tool one can use to record incidents is a **safety incident report** and should include AS MANY details about the incident as possible, including:

- **Who:** was involved - victims, witnesses, perpetrators (if known) and include roles (e.g., staff/ climate leader, volunteer, police, protester, private safety)
- **What:** Describe what happened - the nature of the incident (e.g., surveillance, harassment, arrest, break-in, online threat) and any immediate impact or damage.
- **When:** Record the exact date and time of the incident
- **Where:** Note the precise location -street address, building, or coordinates — and any context (e.g., near a mobilisation site, office, or checkpoint).
- **Why:** Explain the possible motivation (if known) -for example, targeting due to activism, identity, or event participation.
- **How:** Describe how the incident occurred -methods used (e.g., online attack, physical assault, surveillance device), sequence of events, and any response actions taken.
- **Response & Follow-up Actions:** Any actions taken immediately after the incident and basic next steps (e.g. medical care, reported to police etc.).
- **Evidence:** List or attach supporting materials - photos, screenshots of messages (e.g. for harassment or intimidation)

EXAMPLE: In South Africa, in the **case** of environmental and land rights leaders in KwaZulu-Natal particularly within the **Abahlali baseMjondolo** movement between 2018 and 2022, multiple members of this grassroots organisation were assassinated for speaking out against land injustice and state corruption. Prior to these killings, the movement had been documenting ongoing threats, intimidation, and police harassment against its leaders and communities.

This documentation served several critical functions: it helped the organisation and its allies recognise a pattern of targeted violence, allowing them to issue public warnings and seek protection from regional and international human rights groups. The records were also used to brief journalists and NGOs, contributing to global advocacy campaigns that brought attention to the shrinking civic space in South Africa and has supported calls for legal accountability and continues to inform the movement's internal safety protocols and advocacy strategies. Without a systematic record of these incidents, many of the abuses would have gone unacknowledged or been dismissed as isolated events, thus allowing them to continue unmitigated.



CONTINGENCY PLANS



In the context of environmental and climate activism in Southern Africa, youth leaders often face various physical, digital, and psychological risks - ranging from surveillance and intimidation to detainment or forced displacement. Having a contingency plan in place is crucial for personal and team safety after a safety incident has occurred. This chapter outlines core components of a holistic safety risk management strategy, including escalation trees, hibernation/relocation strategies, emergency kits ("grab bags"), and critical conversations with trusted allies.

6.1 Escalation Tree in Case of Lost Contact

An escalation tree is a predefined chain of communication and action to follow when a youth climate leader becomes unreachable or is believed to be in danger. It helps prevent panic and ensures timely, coordinated responses. This is also included in the travel preparation form and will be vital in response to an emergency while travelling.



Steps to Create an Escalation Tree

1. Define communication check-ins (e.g., “If I don’t check in every 12 hours”).
2. Establish a response timeline, such as:

- **0–2 hours:** Try direct contact (calls, messages).
- **2–4 hours:** Contact local network/contacts.
- **4–8 hours:** Alert trusted safety contact
- **8+ hours:** Notify your network, possibly initiate a search of local hospitals/police stations
- **12–24+ hours:** Contact family/emergency contact and legal support (in case of arrest/detention). The Project 90 support hub can also be contacted here:
<https://90by2030.org.za/youth-support-hub/>

EXAMPLE: In Zimbabwe, during anti-coal mobilisations in Hwange, young climate advocates reported threats from local safety actors. A local youth collective in Bulawayo implemented an escalation tree. When a member failed to check in after a site visit, the team followed the plan, eventually discovering the individual had been detained. Because escalation steps were followed, legal support was provided within hours which lowered the risk of assault or other physical harm by police which may have been more serious had the local response only come much later due to confusion on how to escalate the emergency.

Tools: to Use for Effective coordination in an emergency:

- Briefing with the whole team before an action/activity to make sure all are aware of the agree upon escalation tree
- Encrypted messaging apps with location-sharing (e.g., Signal,)
- Shared calendars with check-in reminders





6.2 Hibernation and Relocation

Sometimes the safest course of action is to **“hibernate”** - lay low or “freeze” work that is attracting the unwanted attention), or **relocate** - either temporarily or permanently based on an assessment of available risk information.

When to Hibernate

In response to:

- Heightened surveillance.
- Online doxxing or credible threats to life.
- Escalating mobilisations with violence risk.

EXAMPLE: In Namibia, a climate youth climate leader involved in sand mining resistance in the Kavango region hibernated at a relative's house in Windhoek for two weeks after receiving anonymous threats. They halted public activity and used a pseudonym online during this period. After the two weeks, a reassessment was made with their programme director to assess whether it was safe for them to continue their work as before or to limit certain activities

When to Relocate

This would depend largely on the context of your work:

- Physical threats
- Imminent arrest or kidnapping risk
- Political instability or mob targeting

EXAMPLE: South Africa, following mobilisations against fracking in the Karoo, a youth climate leader received death threats. With the help of a local human rights NGO and emergency fund, they temporarily relocated to Cape Town for safety and continued advocacy remotely.



6.3 Grab Bag

A **grab bag** (also called a “go bag”) is a pre-packed emergency kit designed for quick evacuation. Local context is everything, so pack for the specific needs of your country/region.

Basic Contents

- Copies of **ID, passport, and any other legal documents (e.g. residence permit for border crossing into South Africa).**
- Cash, cards and mobile money backup.
- Phone + power bank [at least 10000mAh] + charger.
- SIM cards (local + international) in case borders need to be crossed in a rush.
- A change of clothes, hygiene products.
- Emergency contact list (printed and digital).
- Laptop [with sensitive files encrypted]
- Basic first aid supplies.
- Energy bars/snacks or nuts which don't spoil easily

Additional Regional Considerations

- **Water purification tablets** or portable filters (for rural youth leaders).
- **Rain gear or dust masks** (relevant for outdoor mobilisation zones).

Keep your grab bag small enough to carry easily – generally keeping the bag below 10 kilograms (maximum) is recommended. Repack every few months to ensure documents and items are current (consumables like snacks haven't expired).



6.4 Discussions with Trusted Contacts

No contingency plan is complete without **pre-arranged conversations** with your trusted circle. These could include fellow youth leaders, legal advisers, journalists, family, or members of the diaspora.

What to Discuss

1. Triggers:

What situations justify activating the plan (e.g., arrest, attack, threats, loss of phone)?

2. Support Protocols:

- Who provides what? (legal help, shelter, travel assistance)
- How to contact in an emergency?
- What not to do (e.g., don't post unverified info on social media).

3. Information Sharing:

Provide a secure copy of your escalation tree, key documents, or emergency contacts to 1-2 trusted allies working in the same region to help as backups in case of crisis.

e.g. Climate Coalition in Johannesburg

After several threats against student climate leaders, a collective formed a “buddy system” between organisations that included agreements on:

- When to inform media in a crisis (narrative)
- Legal aid contacts on standby for arrests/detention (legal)
- Emergency pick-up spots (physical)
- Agreed up secure communications channels (digital)
- Dorm rooms or temporary safe houses for relocation (physical)
- Shared mental wellness resource – a local counsellor - for debriefs after stressful activities (psychosocial)

Final Checklist

- Do you have an updated escalation tree?
- Are your trusted contacts aware of your plan?
- Is your grab bag packed and accessible?
- Have you mapped hibernation/relocation options?
- Do you have a printed copy of emergency contacts?

Conclusion:

Effective physical and holistic safety is essential for youth climate and environmental leaders across Southern Africa and should not be a luxury that only bigger, better funded organisations enjoy – but rather practical steps ALL organisations and youth leaders can implement for free.

By understanding potential risks, building strong support networks and implementing even some of the most basic safety mitigation measures suggested above - youth leaders can build resilience to emerging threats in a rapidly changing world and stay safe so that the vital work you do can continue.

Safety is not a one-time action but an ongoing process that requires awareness, planning, and collective care. Through continued learning and collaboration, youth leaders can better protect themselves and each other while driving meaningful change for a sustainable future.



REFERENCES/USEFUL ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

- **Front Line Defenders Holistic Safety Manual**
<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/holistic-safety-manual>
- **Tactical Tech's Umbrella App**
<https://safetyinbox.org/en/guide/umbrella/>
- **Southern Defenders – Protection Support for Human Rights Defenders**
<https://southernafricadefenders.africa/>
- **Namibia Media Trust's Digital Safety Tools**
<https://nmt.africa/resources/>
- **Legal Resources Centre (South Africa)**
<https://lrc.org.za/>
- **Humanitarian Practice Network. (2010). Good Practice Review 8: Operational Safety Management in Violent Environments.**
<https://odihpn.org>
- **CIVICUS. (2022). Safety and Safety for Civil Society.**
<https://www.civicus.org>
- **Front Line Defenders' "Risk Analysis for Human Rights Defenders"**
<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/safety-manual>
- **Regional climate threats by region – An Analysis**
<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/news-events/countries-and-territories-most-affected-by-climate-change-also-more-likely-to-believe-it-to-be-personally-harmful/>
- **Crenshaw, K. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991)**
- **Amnesty International, Youth Activists against Gender-Based Violence (2025) – highlights gender-sensitive interventions in SA townships**
[Studocu: Amnesty International](#)
- **Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, "Zimbabwe: Mutoko villagers not happy with granite-mining companies" (Jun 2023) – details community resistance**
[Business & Human Rights Resource Centre](#)
- **Earth Journalism Network, "Chinese Continue Mining Black Granite in Mutoko... Amid Human Rights Concerns" (Oct 2022)**
[EarthJournalismNetwork - Mutoko, Zimbabwe](#)
- **ResearchGate, Assessment of Benefits and Costs of Black Granite Quarrying in Mutoko (2017) – socio-environmental impact analysis**
[ResearchGate](#)